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"Mah Story Ends," or Does It?: Orality in Zora Neale Hurston's "The Eatonville Anthology"

Trinna S. Frever

> ...Somebody tried to say that it was a mouth organ harp that John was playing, but the rest of them would not hear that. Don't care how good anybody could play a harp, God would rather to hear a guitar. That brought them back to Tea Cake. How come he couldn't hit that box a lick or two? Well, all right now, make us know it.
> When it got good to everybody, Muck-Boy woke up and began to chant with the rhythm and everybody bore down on the last word of the line:
> Yo' mama don't wear no Draws
> Ah seen her when she took 'em Off
> She soaked 'em in alcoHol
> She sold 'em tuh de Santy Claus
> He told her 'twas aginst de Law
> To wear dem dirty Draws
> Then Muck-Boy went crazy through the feet and danced himself and everybody else crazy.
> (Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* 149)

1 This passage from Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* contains a number of cues to understanding Hurston's distinct use of orality within her fiction. First, in Hurston's world, storytelling and music are often intertwined. Spoken language and song alike have rhythm, pitch, volume, vibrato, syncopation, inflection, and an ability to transcend the linearity of written music and the written word through the power of sound and voice. Hurston's in-text guidelines as to where the emphasis should fall when speaking, as in "everyone bore down on the last word of the line," demonstrate that this text is an oral one as well as a written one, designed to capture the qualities of the spoken voice. By having the community join in the chant, join in the singing, and join the creation of the music and the text simultaneously, Hurston further demonstrates that her use of orality is created by, and itself creates, a community around music, language, story, and sound. Drawing on oral storytelling techniques from an African American cultural context, and situating her firmly within the literary and musical worlds of the Harlem

Renaissance, Hurston's orality stretches far beyond the use of spoken dialogue or dialect in a text. Orality becomes an overarching aesthetic that shapes her narrative along vocal and communal lines, as a sung melody rather than a linear typescript. In turn, this synthesized oral-print text requires a reader to reconsider all assumptions brought to reading as an individual act, and a print form.

2 The mellifluous orality that appears in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is even more evident in the Hurston's collection of short sketches, "The Eatonville Anthology," which precedes *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by more than ten years. Yet notably, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* remains the far more studied of the two texts, even in terms of its use of the oral voice.[1] When "The Eatonville Anthology" is discussed, it is usually addressed as a forerunner of characters and narrative techniques that reappear in Hurston's later work. For example Crosland, in his essay on an editorial error in the text, writes: "Because it exemplifies Hurston's literary use of folklore and introduces characters and episodes which later appear in Hurston's *Mules and Men, Seraph on the Suwanee*, and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the piece is attractive to anthologists" (422). Alice Walker discusses "The Eatonville Anthology" as an imperfect version of themes and techniques that Hurston would get "perfectly right" in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (175-6). My essay asserts that "The Eatonville Anthology" is a notable text for study in its own right, particularly for its use of oral aesthetics. The Eatonville sketches exemplify characteristics of style and construction that remove them from the realm of printed fiction, and place them on the precarious edge between the spoken and the written. Further, "The Eatonville Anthology" is a community text, using the short fictional form to depict the bonding of individuals into a community through spoken narrative. In both these respects, "The Eatonville Anthology" stands as an important example of the oral-print textual form.

3 In my previous work on orality, I draw upon works such as Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy*, Richard Bauman's *Verbal Art as Performance*, *The Empire Writes Back* (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin), the anthology *The Pressures of the Text* (ed. Brown), Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *Figures in Black*, and the writings of Native American author and theorist Paula Gunn Allen, to identify a set of characteristics that make up what I term the "oral-print" text: a text that interweaves the forms and aesthetics of oral storytelling and print fiction (Frever). Among these characteristics are the use of inset narration, whereby a story is passed off from teller to teller within a storytelling circle; a use of regional and/or colloquial language distinctive for both its sound and rhythm; the use of distinct speaking styles or idioms for individual characters; a use of onomatopoeia and sound words to rupture the linearity of the print form and the arbitrariness of the signifier/signified relationship; an invocation of "mythic time" associated with fairy and folk tales, rather than the strict linear-historical time associated with print; a use of circular or episodic plot structure, again to disrupt the linear-historical print time; and a recreation of the relationship between author, text, and audience, realigning the normally individual act of reading with the shared act of listening, and of participating in narrative construction (Frever).[2] Hurston's work exemplifies all of these qualities, and "The Eatonville Anthology" adds another dimension to their portrayal, by the creation of a narrative community within the text, as well as between the text and its reader-listener.

4 For those unfamiliar with the text, "The Eatonville Anthology" is a collection of fourteen very short fictional sketches that illustrate folkloric-type episodes from the real-life community of Eatonville, Florida. It can be interpreted as a double-short story, in that each of the pieces is a short story or sketch unto itself, and their composite whole is also a

short work. Twelve of the fourteen sketches could be termed character studies, as they each focus on a particular member of the Eatonville community and a distinctive personality trait associated with that character, revealing his/her role in Eatonville at large. For instance, Mrs. Tony Roberts is "the pleading woman," who goes door to door begging for food, though the narrator is insistent that she is well provided for within her household (Hurston, "Eatonville," 177-8). Her whiny refrain, "Tony doan' fee-ee-eed me," serves as a unique oral language moment that embodies her distinct personality, her distinct speaking style, and her role within Eatonville society (Hurston, "Eatonville," 177). Similarly, Old Man Anderson is the keeper of old-time ways who is so afraid of the modern freight train that he runs from its noise with himself hitched to his wagon instead of his horse, translating a folk tale into the Eatonville world (Hurston, "Eatonville," 179-80). Mrs. McDuffy is the woman who risks her husband's wrath for shouting out in church, all because she can't "squinch the sperrit," another lively example of orality through both the aforementioned phrase, and the defiant act of vocalization (Hurston, "Eatonville," 181). Even Tippy, the town dog, is given a personality and a community role in his propensity for stealing scraps from the "village kitchens" of "careless" housewives (Hurston, "Eatonville," 178). While these brief descriptions of the Eatonville characters, from Mrs. Tony to the dog Tippy, sound nearly two-dimensional, more caricature than character, the danger of racial stereotyping is evaded by the effect of the text in its entirety, for each character is part of the full composite picture of the town and of the narrative. They are the many sides of a whole, rather than a complete picture unto itself. Thus, by its very structure, "The Eatonville Anthology" draws on oral narrative construction in several ways. "The Eatonville Anthology" uses distinct oral idioms to define the individual characters as an oral storyteller might do, thus vesting both the characters and the narrative process with aspects of orality. "The Eatonville Anthology" also draws from pre-established oral tales, so that its narrative fabric is interwoven with oral tradition. Most importantly, "The Eatonville Anthology" creates a community text from a series of individual moments, defying the print plot convention of a single protagonist progressing through a single linear storyline, creating instead a composite picture and a communal text that metafictionally depicts the characters themselves participating in the creation.

5 In defining "The Eatonville Anthology" as a community text or community narrative, I am drawing upon and also departing from the concept of a "narrative of community" as defined in Sandra Zagarell's essay "Narrative of Community: The Identification of a Genre." Zagarell defines her narratives of community primarily as texts "that take as their subject the life of a community...and portray the minute and quite ordinary processes through which the community maintains itself as an entity" (499). I both expand and restrict Zagarell's model by redefining community narratives as not only narratives that depict communities –and therefore depart structurally from single-protagonist narratives, as Zagarell also notes (503-4)— but narratives where the depicted community is conceived as a creative community whose members, in some measure, participate in the narrative construction.[3] "The Eatonville Anthology" is also a community narrative in that it comprises individual narratives, twelve of which are based on a single Eatonville character, creating a community in both the literal and metaphoric senses. That is, the narrative itself is parallel to the real-life community, in that embraces the narratives of individuals within its collective framework. Further, in "The Eatonville Anthology" the creative community is also a musical/oral storytelling community wherein both the characters and the reader/listeners are cast as a collective audience,

bonded through the act of singing and tale telling, and producing a narrative formed by oral storytelling aesthetics.

6 Thus, while the use of composite or community narrative may not appear distinctly oral in itself, it draws upon the oral storytelling practice of including the audience in the act of construction, and replicates the community act of oral storytelling itself. In turn, this oral storytelling aesthetic shapes other seemingly non-oral aspects of the text as well. As previously discussed, each character's own story within "The Eatonville Anthology" is a living moment of text, existing both in itself and as part of the larger Eatonville community narrative. This portrayal, in turn, affects the narrative's relationship to time and history. The Eatonville sketches draw simultaneously on folkloric oral traditions, like those Hurston would later collect for the volume *Negro Folk-tales from the Gulf States* (now published as *Every Tongue Got to Confess: Negro Folk-tales from the Gulf States*), and the real-life Eatonville community Hurston experienced as a child.[4] So, the text itself is located both in the historical specificity of Hurston's childhood Eatonville and the time-outside-of-time associated with the fairy and folk tale, the mythic time of "once upon a time" or "il était une fois." By aligning simultaneously with the historical specificity of print and the ephemeral time-moment of orality, the Eatonville sketches live in the middle stylistic space between print and orality. Hurston's text demonstrates its strong bond to the realm of oral storytelling from within the print page, where meaning resonates and reverberates within and between the words.

7 The oral aesthetic of "The Eatonville Anthology" is heightened when one learns the story of the work's origins: Hurston would perform the sketches at Harlem Renaissance parties, like a witty cocktail joke or a shared song (Walker, 175). Understanding the performative possibility suggested by the text's origins solidifies its roots in orality and performance, with their associated effects on audience: a use of voice to shift and evade the strict linearity of the print form, an evocation of a shared textual moment outside of linear time, and a creation of community bond through textual construction that takes place both within the text performed and within the moment of performance, extending to the contemporary audience and recreating the listeners as part of the Eatonville narrative community.

8 In this context, the sketch that interests me most, and that I will discuss for the balance of this essay, is the eleventh sketch in the collection, entitled "Double Shuffle." One of only two sketches that does not focus on a particular character, "Double Shuffle" brings the entire Eatonville community together for a dance –a "breakdown"-- that is described in significantly oral detail (Hurston, "Eatonville," 182). "Double Shuffle" is a microcosm of the text as a whole, a brief narrative moment that encapsulates the achievement of the larger narrative in its creation of a community text from a set of individual ones, and the depiction of this community as creators unto themselves.

9 Beyond its interest as a sketch that draws the Eatonville community together, "Double Shuffle" is also a repository of oral storytelling techniques played out within print fiction. First amongst these is the use of an inset song within the sketch. As before, it is the oral artistic forms of music and storytelling, as well as the physical form of dance, that draw the community together, and in turn shape the aesthetics of the narrative. In "Double Shuffle," as the Eatonville residents dance a dance called the "buck and wing," Hurston transcribes lines of the song in verse form:

> 'Me an' mah honey got two mo' days
> two mo' days tuh do de buck'

(Hurston, *Eatonville*, 182)

10 Hurston provides a full twenty lines of song text within the sketch, also including the following lines:

> Long tall angel – steppin' down,
> Long white robe an' starry crown
> (Eatonville, 183).

11 This song transcription illustrates the multifaceted functions of orality in the print text. First, the use of orality is literal. An actual oral text is placed within the print text, bursting the prescriptive bounds of the text on the page through its spacing, and through its use of oral characteristics inherent to the song text, but often considered to be outside the print form. For example, the language of the song is written colloquially, in regionally and culturally specific terms, "mo' days" rather than "more days," "tuh" rather than "to," and the removal of g's and d's and other end-stopped consonants from the ends of words like "stepping" and "and" (Hurston, "Eatonville," 182-3). The use of spoken-word conventions within the print form, particularly ones that connect disparate words and allow sounds to blend one into the next, permits the text to flow in a smooth verbal presentation, rather than a strictly articulated print style that observes precise separation of word from word and sentence from sentence. In her use of culturally-specific, African American regionalized oral language and euphonic sound-transcription, Hurston uses orality to transcend print form, and create a flowing language style that itself replicates music. Hurston's song-text also emphasizes the physicality of the dancers through its lyrics, which suggest a dancer's motions:

> Long tall angel – steppin' down,
> Long white robe an' starry crown

12 While numerous dances from the "buck and wing" to the "grand march" to the "double shuffle" are described in the text, these lyrics are particularly evocative of dancerly motion. One can almost picture the dancers of the text "steppin' down" in synchronization with the lyrics. In this moment, each textual signifier (dance, music, and language) evokes the other, and the act of "steppin' down" becomes simultaneously lyrical, choreographed, and textual. Further, since the lyrics invoke angels, the dancers themselves become the angels as they dance. In so doing, the corporeal physicality of dancing is carried over into the textual moment, creating a tension between physicality and aphysicality that applies equally to angels, fictional characters, and storytellers. Since storytellers themselves embody narrative characters as they perform them, this portrayal in Hurston's narrative adds an additional physical component to the textual act. Through this portrayal of body, spirit, and voice as living presences in the written text, with their own aesthetics of sound and motion, Hurston creates a print style that stretches beyond itself, into the living, breathing world of the oral, and physically performed, tale.[5]

13 These effects are not limited to the song-moment in "Double Shuffle." The narration itself replicates the song style, as if the song has wafted outward into the story, restructuring the narration along melodious lines. When the dancers are described, the narrative voice takes up the oral and physical style of the characters' voices, as so: "Feet dragged 'shhlap 'shhlap! to beat out the time. No orchestra needed. Round and round! Back again, parse-me-la! shlap! shlap! Strut! Strut! Seaboard! Shlap! Shlap! Tiddy bumm!" (Hurston, "Eatonville," 182). Along with the culturally and regionally specific language and enacted physicality of this narrative passage, it contains additional characteristics defining

Hurston's unique oral style. The use of fragments is particularly notable because this technique is absent from many of Hurston's other works. In "Spunk" and "Sweat," for example, the characters speak in an oral style, while the narrator preserves a formal, standardized diction.[6] Yet in "The Eatonville Anthology," Hurston allows the orality of the characters to waft outward into the narrator's speech, as the example above demonstrates, thus reforming the entire fiction stylistically. Hurston also makes notable use of sound words like "shlap." As I argue in my work "The Woman and the Spoken Word," sound words transform a print text both by bringing the oral language realm to bear on the printed fiction, and also by expanding our notion of language itself. While contemporary criticism emphasizes a gap between signifier and signified in language construction, onomatopoeic moments defy the arbitrariness of language systems, creating linguistic moments where sound and meaning –and sound and text- are wholly one. Like the scat singer who uses non-linguistic vocal syllables to turn the voice into an instrument, Hurston's usage transforms textual language into a sound-moment vested with meaning intrinsic to that sound. Thus her fiction forces the reader to reconsider language and textual construction through the moment of orality in the narration.

14 Like the jazz of her day, this oral-print writing style emphasizes the spontaneity of improvisation –a practical impossibility in the print form— by establishing a community of creators participating in the textual construction. The whole of Eatonville are creators of the song they sing and the dance they dance. We know that "the blind man" Lizzimore is providing organ and/or guitar accompaniment to the dancing, and that he is "assisted by any volunteer with mouth organs or accordions" (Hurston, "Eatonville," 182). As with the example that began this essay, in "Double Shuffle," the characters that aren't dancing are "shouting as they clap the old, old double shuffle songs" (Hurston, "Eatonville," 182). So when the song is transcribed, it is not only an oral text unto itself, but is understood to be sung by the Eatonville community. Therefore, the textual players are transformed from mere characters to coauthors of the text. The simultaneously listening and participating audience within the text parallels the audience of Hurston's –and our – own performative moment. One could almost imagine Hurston's own audience joining in on the designated lyrics, adding their 1920s voices to the voices of her characters in a single, unified chorus.[7] [8]

15 So, in "Double Shuffle" Hurston incorporates several elements of orality within the printed form. "Double Shuffle" brings the members of Eatonville together, taking the individual characterization from the volume's other sketches and recasting it as community experience, and community narrative. This communal narrative is bonded through music and dance, bringing the performative and oral qualities of language to bear on the printed fiction. All of the Eatonville sketches draw on oral storytelling in their use of language, characterization, structure, and time, in order to create living, physicalized textual moments in contrast to stale and dusty written histories. Finally, all of the elements of orality within the fiction are available to the reader who is brought into the Eatonville community through the narrative style. Hurston's writing invites us to participate, to sing and to dance and to tell stories, alongside her fictional-historical characters, by depicting a creative community that acts simultaneously as listeners and participants.

16 Aside from the genius of her individual artistry, these techniques serve important cultural functions within Hurston's historical moment. Her use of orality exemplifies the Harlem Renaissance concern with creating an art form vested in the African American

experience. Her aesthetics of voice, physicality, and community strongly reflect a culture influenced by oral tradition. Again, like the jazz of the period, Hurston's writing represents a relationship to time, language, and history that challenges white American assumptions about each of these entities through both its content and its style. Hurston's work can also be read in relationship to the U.S.'s women regionalist writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, who strove to use literature in part as a cultural artifact, preserving the folkways of their contemporaries before they are lost to a culture of increasing national consumerism and trans-regional popular culture (Frever). "The Eatonville Anthology" preserves the community structure, values, language, music, and dance of its members, not like a fossil trapped in a rock, but like a spiritual song, passed verbally through generations, altered with each voice that sings it, and also bringing to life each past voice in chorus with each new performance. As such, though "The Eatonville Anthology"'stext ends with the phrase, "Stepped on a tin, mah story ends," the understanding that orality brings to the text is that the ending is never an ending (Hurston, "Eatonville," 188). Through the use of orality, the text lives in the time outside time of "il était une fois," lives in the improvisational moment of the jazz composition, and is brought to life anew with the breath of each voice that lives within it, and each new voice that performs it. While some narratives may create tension or dis-ease when combining print and orality, Hurston creates oral-print as a narrative dance: two partners with individual styles, coming together to create something new and beautiful through their collective motion. And the entire community is invited to join in.

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NOTES

1. Essays that explore orality in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* include, but are not limited to, Basu; Benesch; Brigham; Peters; and Vickers. Also notable is Harris' "Performing Personae and Southern Hospitality: Zora Neale Hurston in *Mules and Men*," which explores Hurston presentation of folkloric material in her fiction.

2. While I draw on sources from a range of national, regional, and cultural traditions to create my concept of the oral-print text, I am not suggesting that these techniques be understood wholly apart from their cultural contexts. Rather, I suggest that certain elements of orality are

observable across a range of contexts, though they may manifest differently in each text in which they appear, with respect to culture, nation, region, socioeconomic class, gender, individual artistry, and other factors relating to identity and text. While this theory of orality is, to a degree, posited as cross-cultural, I encourage its application with credit to the cultural context of the text discussed. In Hurston's case, though the elements of orality are similar to those seen in texts from other traditions, her firm affiliation with the Harlem Renaissance, and this movement's emphasis on the recovery/creation of an African American cultural tradition, is very much at play in her use of an oral storytelling framework for her printed fiction.

3. An early example of this form would be *The Canterbury Tales*, wherein nearly every character is also a narrator of a story to the reading/listening audience, and thus a participant in the larger narrative construction. Contemporary examples could include Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, and Whitney Otto's *How to Make an American Quilt*. I do not see direct narration as the only criteria for a creative community, as noted by these examples. In Otto, for example, the characters do not narrate their individual tales, but create their stories through story quilt blocks that are conveyed to the reader-listener, representing the characters as creative participants in narrative construction. Likewise, the characters in "The Eatonville Anthology" do not narrate their individual tales, but when they tell stories or sing songs that are directly conveyed to the reader/listener, they are participating in the textual construction as co-creators.

4. Chronology of Hurston's life and texts is drawn from Russell; and Walker.

5. Hurston's use of dance is not surprising, given that in addition to her work as a fiction writer and folklorist, she also staged dance performances and wrote plays that incorporated African American and Caribbean dance into their staging (Kraut). For detailed analysis of these texts and productions, see Kraut "Between Primitivism and Diaspora" and "Reclaiming the Body."

6. The tension between regional and culturally specific speech and a strictly defined "standard English" narrative voice is also a major interpretative issue in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. See again Brigham; and Vickers.

7. When presenting this paper in conference, the audience participated in the opening passage by collectively voicing "the last word of the line," creating a synchronous moment with the characters of the text(s). While I do not suggest that the specifically African American community of Eatonville and of Hurston's own performative circle is replicated by such an act, I believe that the text lends itself –indeed encourages—reperformance in the verbal realm, and that reperformance draws a correlation between the textual audiences, however disparate in time, nation, and culture.

8. Though not fully explored here, there are also moments in "Double Shuffle" that could be interpreted as cases of signifying, as it is defined by Gates, and that these oral moments also collapse the hierarchical levels of character, author, and audience as previously described. For example, "Double Shuffle" conspicuously mentions the presence of "deacons" at "the breakdown," and goes on to relate a song lyric that states "Would not marry a preacher/Tell yuh de reason why" (Hurston, "Eatonville," 182-3). In the moment of performance, one could read the song as signifying on the figure of the preacher to the group's amusement, recreating him as simultaneously the subject and the object of both the song and the story, highlighting all the intricate interweavings thereof. One can only wonder what the multifold textual effects would be if a preacher were present at Hurston's performance of the song within the tale. Even the title "Double Shuffle" has significant implications for the creation of a simultaneous literal and metaphorical narrative project, as well as for racial identity as conveyed in text. Further scholarly exploration of "The Eatonville Anthology" may reveal more of these complex textual intersections.

ABSTRACTS

L’article étudie les rapports entre les formes orales, musicales, la danse et le texte imprimé dans un texte bref de Zora Neale Hurston, célèbre écrivain de la Renaissance de Harlem. Il s’agit de montrer que “ The Eatonville Anthology ”, quoique assez peu étudié par la critique par comparaison avec Their Eyes Were Watching God, œuvre plus connue du même auteur, caractérise bien l’esthétique du récit oral-écrit. Il traite particulièrement de la création, par l’auteur, d’une “ communauté narrative ” par l’emploi de l’oralité, et de la manière dont des textes autonomes forment un véritable ensemble narratif.

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Trinna S. Frever holds a Ph.D. in English specializing in women’s literature and American literature (1850 - present). A lecturer in the English department at the University of Michigan, Frever’s teaching emphasizes formal exploration of the short story and the novel. Her primary research focuses on intermedia theory, exploring the textual intersection of music, dance, architecture, film, photography, painting, oral storytelling, and print fiction. In addition to her scholarly endeavors, Frever is a fiction writer whose first collection of short fiction, *Trouble with Faces*, was published in December 2005.